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OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS
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DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE ANNOUNCES FINDINGS ON BODY ARMOR SAFETY INITIATIVE TESTING

Department of Justice to Provide \$33.6 million to Assist Law Enforcement in Replacing Zylon Vests

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The Department of Justice (DOJ), as part of its ongoing Body Armor Safety Initiative testing, announced today that test results indicate that used Zylon-containing body armor vests may not provide the intended level of ballistic resistance. As a result, DOJ will adopt new interim requirements for its body armor compliance testing program, and will add an additional \$10 million to the \$23.6 million already available to law enforcement through DOJ's Bulletproof Vest Partnership (BVP) program to assist in the replacement of Zylon-based body armor vests.

"Law enforcement officers put their lives at risk every day, so they must have accurate information about the safety of body armor," said Regina B. Schofield, Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs (OJP). "The new testing program requirements and the \$33.6 million provided to help with vest replacement demonstrate the Department of Justice's commitment to helping ensure that law enforcement officers have protective equipment they can rely on as they strive to keep communities safe."

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the research, development, and evaluation arm of DOJ, conducted extensive testing on used Zylon-based body armor. The testing was carried out as part of the Attorney General's Body Armor Safety Initiative, which began in November 2003. The latest report, NIJ's Third Status Report to the Attorney General on Body Armor Safety Initiative Testing and Activities, is available at <https://vests.ojp.gov>.

NIJ performed ballistic testing on 103 Zylon-containing used armor vests from law enforcement agencies across the United States. Of these vests, 60 (58 percent) were penetrated by at least one round during a six-shot test series. Of those that passed penetration testing, 91 percent showed excessive "backface deformation," an indicator of the potential blunt trauma experienced by an officer wearing the armor. Only four used armor vests tested met all performance criteria under NIJ's body armor standard for new body armor. In the tests, age and appearance of used Zylon-based vests were ineffective predictors of potential ballistic performance.

NIJ's research also showed that ballistic-resistant material, including Zylon, can degrade as a result of exposure to environmental conditions, such as moisture and light. It is likely that the ballistic performance degradation in Zylon-containing armor is closely related to the chemical changes found in what is known as the oxazole ring. Breakage of the oxazole ring correlates with degradation of the mechanical properties of Zylon fibers.

The Department of Justice is taking the following actions:

* To better meet the vest replacement needs of America's law enforcement agencies this year, the Department will make \$23.6 million available to them through its FY 2005 BVP program, and an additional \$10 million will be available through a special BVP solicitation.

* The Department is issuing a Body Armor Standard Advisory Notice to alert law enforcement to the potential risks associated with the use of Zylon in body armor, and will adopt new interim requirements for its body armor compliance testing program. As a result, body armor models that contain Zylon will not be compliant, unless their manufacturers provide satisfactory evidence to NIJ that the models will maintain their ballistic performance over their declared warranty period. Also, until the new requirements become effective, Zylon-containing armor vests will not be eligible for purchase with federal funds through the BVP program.

* The Department will continue its comprehensive research to examine ballistic-resistant materials and improve understanding of degradation mechanisms. As new information becomes available, DOJ will issue advisories regarding materials used in the construction of body armor that appear to create a risk of death or serious injury as a result of degraded ballistic performance.

* DOJ recommends that public safety agencies and officers purchase only bullet-resistant body armor models that comply with its new interim requirements, especially if their existing armor contains Zylon. A list of body armor models that comply with the new requirements will be made available at <http://www.justnet.org>.

* Additionally, notwithstanding NIJ's research findings, DOJ continues to encourage public safety officers to wear their Zylon-containing body armor until it is replaced, because even armor that may have degraded ballistic performance is better than no armor. DOJ also encourages officers to follow body armor manufacturer "wear and care" instructions, such as not to store their armor in the trunk of their vehicle or not to put the ballistic panels in the washing machine.

* Attorney General John Ashcroft called upon NIJ in November 2003 to initiate an examination of Zylon-based bullet-resistant vests, both new and used, and to review NIJ's existing testing program for bullet-resistant armor vests. The just-released Third Status Report follows two previous reports issued in response to this initiative. NIJ released the findings from the first phase of its research in March 2004 at the Body Armor Summit convened by OJP. A December 2004 status report noted that upgrade kits provided by a manufacturer of Zylon-containing body armor to retrofit Zylon-containing armor did not appear to bring used armor up to the level of performance of new armor. Information about the Body Armor Safety Initiative and the Bulletproof Vest Partnership program can be found at <https://vests.ojp.gov>.

* The Office of Justice Programs provides federal leadership in developing the nation's capacity to prevent and control crime, administer justice, and assist victims. OJP is headed by an Assistant Attorney General and comprises five component bureaus and two offices:

the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the National Institute of Justice; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; and Office for Victims of Crime, as well as the Office of the Police Corps and Law Enforcement Education and the Community Capacity Development Office, which incorporates the Weed and Seed strategy and OJP's American Indian and Alaska Native Affairs Desk. More information can be found at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov>.

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